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ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on the development of an online, graduate course entitled "Marriage and Family Therapy." This course was a traditional, face-to-face class, offered by an urban university. The professor who teaches the course worked with three graduate students during the Fall 2000 semester to design and develop the online version of the course, which she then taught during the Spring and Summer 2001 semesters. In addition to describing the development process, this paper summarizes lessons learned and keys to successful online graduate instruction. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/MES)

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# If they ask you to put your course online over the weekend, tell them to take a hike

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*Abstract:* This presentation focuses on the development of an online, graduate course entitled Marriage and Family Therapy. This course was a traditional, face-to-face, class, offered by an urban university. The professor who teaches this course worked with three graduate students during the Fall, 2000 semester to design and develop the online version of this course, which she then taught during both the Spring and Summer 2001 semesters. In addition to describing the development process, this article summarizes lessons learned and keys to successful online graduate instruction.

The Marriage and Family Therapy course is an introductory theory class in marriage and family counseling. It requires students to shift their worldview from linear to systemic thinking. The objectives of this course are to: (1) introduce the student to an understanding about relational and systems paradigms; (2) introduce the major systems theories; (3) expose the student to family life-cycle development, healthy family functioning, diversity, and family-of-origin issues; (3) examine the roles of marriage and family counselors in a variety of practice settings; (4) observe various theories in use; (5) examine professional issues such as training, supervision, and ethical concerns; and (6) integrate theoretical concepts using the student's family of origin.

In the traditional, face-to-face class, the professor provided an overview of the major theoretical orientations in systems therapy. In written assignments, as well as in small group discussions, students examined their own family dynamics to identify personal issues that might hinder or assist their ability to work with clients. To understand the theoretical constructs of different counseling theories, students used examples from their own family history and watched videos of experts applying different theories. They also worked in small groups to analyze several different cases from several different theoretical perspectives. Additional assignments included a current research issues paper, a midterm, and a final examination.

There were two major reasons for developing an online version of the Marriage and Family Therapy course. First, the online course needed to provide students in rural areas the opportunity to participate in the program without having to travel long distances. Second, the course is an introductory course taught by several professors in the counseling department. The online course had to be structured so that these various faculty members could easily teach the online version of the course.

The challenge in the design of the online course was to maintain the integrity and instructional quality of the traditional, face-to-face course. It was especially challenging to create the discussion segments of the course that relate to the student's own family. We used the eCollege℠ course management software to develop this course, which resides on the eCollege server. The specific eCollege features we used were the Webliography℠, Document-sharing, the Journal, and the Threaded Discussion.

The Webliography and Document-sharing features allowed students, the professor, and the teaching assistant to share course related resources. The Webliography℠ contained links to the Internet. Students, the professor, and the teaching assistant can all add relevant information to the

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Webliography. One of the assignments was for students to add five new relevant websites during the duration of the course. In addition to the URL, students provided a brief description of the site and rated its usefulness on a five point Likert scale. The Document Sharing feature allows students, the professor, and the teaching assistant to share word processing documents, images, spreadsheets, etc. The professor posted sample assignments in the Document Sharing section of the course to help students understand specific assignments and to provide alternative ideas for completing each assignment. Students shared their papers with each other by posting both drafts and final papers in Document Sharing (Lamb & Smith, 2000).

The family of origin analysis was one of the major assignments in the Marriage and Family Therapy course. This was often a difficult assignment for students due to the personal nature of the questions and sometimes the emotional reaction to addressing these issues. The eCollege Journal feature allowed students to share their family origin assignment with the professor, who could add comments and responses to the student's journal entries. Students could choose to share their journal entries with other students or with just the professor.

The Threaded Discussion feature allows students to post responses to a discussion question and respond to the comments posted by other students, the professor, and the teaching assistant. The online Marriage and Family course used this feature several times during the semester to help students manipulate the course content, thereby making it personally meaningful, and to explore alternative ideas and perspectives. The threaded discussions were also an opportunity for students to interact and communicate with the professor. This student/faculty interaction is a critical aspect of quality online instruction (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001; Shank, 2000).

Threaded Discussions were an integral part of the "lectures" in the online Marriage and Family Therapy course (Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1995). Three guest lecturers, who were practicing marriage and family therapists, each lead a discussion during one week of the course. These experts provided electronic documents or journal articles, which students used to prepare for each discussion. Additionally, the professor assigned several journal articles she had published. Those articles were on the professor's professional website and students linked to each article from the course. This strategy allows other professors, who might teach this course in the future, to merely change the links thereby using their own articles or lecture notes. Videotapes, which were on reserve at the university library, were also used as a type of course lecture.

The course provided for large classes to be divided into small groups, similar to the small groups used in the traditional, face-to-face course. Each small group has its own threaded discussion where students share with each other descriptions of their family dynamics and compare and contrast their family structure, roles, rules, and issues. These small group discussions originate from each student's family of origin assignment but students may choose to not reveal in these discussions everything they included in that assignment. Each small group also has its own Document Sharing section where students can share resources with just the other students in their group.

To replace the current research issues paper, which was assigned in the traditional, face-to-face course, and to facilitate more student interaction, the professor assigned a more practical, less research oriented paper in the online course. During the first week of the Spring 2001 class, the professor asked the students to select a target population for their papers, i.e., either the general public or graduate students. The students selected the general public. Each student then selected a specific topic relevant to marriage and family counseling, researched that topic, and wrote a short paper. Using the Document Sharing feature of eCollege, students analyzed each other's papers and provided feedback and suggested revisions. Students then revised their own papers and submitted them to the professor for grading. The final papers will be posted to a public website.

### *Development Process*

The team who developed the online Marriage and Family course consisted of the instructor, her teaching assistant, and two instructional designers from the Technology and Learning Team (see next section for more information on TLT). During the first meeting, in August of 2000, the professor explained that she had been asked to develop four online courses for the Spring 2001 semester. We decided that it was impossible to design four effective online courses in one semester, and instead agreed to design one course for the Spring semester and then design another course during the spring for the Summer semester. We also decided to design the Marriage and Family course first and we created a team agreement that outlined the roles and responsibilities of each member of the group.

Generally, we met once per week for about 1.25 hours. During our next few meetings, we evaluated different online course management software products. We selected eCollege primarily because they provide 24/7 technical support to students and professors and because it was one of the online course management products supported by our university. The next step was to convert the major components of the traditional class to an online environment. The components with which we were particularly concerned were:

- The small group discussions of the family of origin assignment
- The case study assignment where student groups review cases from several different theoretical perspectives
- Guest lecturers
- Midterm and final exams that were designed to help students prepare for the state board examination.

Another concern in the development process was how to show the videotapes the professor used in her traditional course for case study work. We considered many options for distributing the videotapes, including streaming video, digitizing the videotapes and distributing CD-ROMs, and using a distribution service to copy the videotapes and distribute them directly to students. The challenge we faced was obtaining copyright permission from the owners of the videotapes. For a variety of reasons, none of our options was successful so we temporarily sidestepped this issue for the Spring and Summer 2001 semesters by placing the videotapes on reserve in our campus Media Center.

By November, our team was ready to learn eCollege and to put content into the course shell. Three of our team members attended formal training at eCollege. The team worked together to learn the technical aspects of eCollege and to design the course to take advantage of the various eCollege features. As we added content to the course, we worked with a graphic designer, from the Technology and Learning Team (see below for more information on the Technology and Learning Team), to include visuals and the professor added copyright-free clip art. Many of the visuals were in the weekly introductions, which are short motivational documents. The teaching assistant entered over 300 test questions and reviewed the course as a student to look for inconsistencies and problems. Specifically, she was making sure potential students knew what they needed to do each week and what was expected of them. The teaching assistant repeated this formative evaluation several times during the development process.

As a team, we spent approximately 400 hours developing the online Marriage and Family Therapy course. The professor spent approximately 200 hours, her teaching assistant spent approximately 80 hours, and the two graduate students from the Technology and Learning Team spent a total of approximately 120 hours.

### *Technology and Learning Team (TLT)*

The TLT mission is to assist the faculty in the effective use of instructional technologies. Thirteen graduate students, primarily from the Information and Learning Technology program in the School of Education, staff the TLT and each generally works 15 to 20 hours per week. There is one full-time staff member. For more information on the TLT, please see their website at www.tlt.cudenver.edu.

### *Lessons Learned*

Student evaluations of the online Marriage and Family Therapy course taught during the Spring 2001 semester were very positive. After the fifth week of the course, students reported that they were pleased with the workload and very satisfied with the interaction with both the professor and the other students. They also reported spending an average of six hours per week working on assignments and readings for the course. Not attending a traditional class or having face-to-face interaction was not a problem for these students. Hardware/software problems and the amount of time required to complete the writing assignments were of moderate concern. As expected, convenience was the major reason for taking the online course, however, knowledge of the instructor was also an important determinant. Students were "highly satisfied" with the course as a learning experience.

At midterm, all students indicated that they were "satisfied" with the online course at that point in the semester and 66.7% reported the course sequencing and assignments were easy to understand and follow and that the pace of the course was "about right." Unfortunately, 66.7% of the students reported significant technical problems that "interfered with their learning."

At the end of ten weeks, students completed another evaluation. Generally, students continued to be positive about all aspects of the course but there was a slight drop. Anecdotally, this dissatisfaction seems to coincide with the same dissatisfaction students express in traditional, face-to-face courses as they approach the 10-12 week point in the semester.

The use of videotapes was, and continues to be, problematic. First, we were unable to obtain copyright permission for the videotapes we used in the traditional, face-to-face course or to establish a distributor for those videotapes. Some developers of online courses upload videos or copy them to CD-ROM without permission but we decided not to do this. As noted above, our temporary work-around was to put these videotapes on reserve at the university Media Center. We are currently investigating alternatives, as the online Marriage and Family course will soon include students who are outside our metropolitan area and thus, can not get to our university. Another problem with the videotapes is if we obtain the resources necessary to put the videos on the Web, our student's Internet connections may not be sufficient to support video streaming. Perhaps our next work-around is to obtain permission to copy the videotapes to CDROM and distribute those CDROMs to the students.

Selecting the best course management software is another important issue in the design of online instruction. We chose eCollege mainly because of the 24/7 technical support and the support our university provided for this product. The technical support both the professor and her students received from eCollege was excellent. Our advice to others is to test the features you need in your course, in the various course management products you consider using. Just because a course management system claims to have "chat," for example, or document sharing, does not mean that feature works as you need for it to work for your unique course design. Also consider the Internet browers and the Internet Service Providers (ISP) you and your students use. Some course management systems work better with some browers and/or some ISPs.

The experience of developing this course was an intellectually stimulating adventure for everyone on the development team. Team members provided their individual strengths to the endeavor, creating a dynamic atmosphere. The process was time consuming and demanding, but well worth the effort, as well as being an enjoyable experience.

It is important to stress, however, the intense time commitment required to develop a quality online course (Creed, 1996; Eiler, 2000; Lamb & Smith, 2000; Smith, 1997). In addition to learning the idiosyncrasies of a particular course management system, the paradigm shift is particularly difficult and it takes time to work through these new ideas. It also takes time and patience to input the course content. Finally, the delivery and implementation of an online course is very time-intensive. A high level of team interaction and support is, therefore, necessary throughout the entire course development and delivery cycle. University administrators often are not willing or able to provide the financial or time resources necessary to develop and deliver effective online instruction. When faculty are asked to develop online courses and continue with their normal workload, instructional quality may suffer, as well as faculty enthusiasm and morale.

In summary, we believe that it is imperative to have sufficient time, support, and resources to design and develop quality online university courses. Adequate time to develop the course in a thoughtful manner and to address the inevitable paradigm shift is critical. Technical training for faculty and funds for graduate assistants to help with both the development and the delivery of the course are also imperative. Finally, resources to take advantage of the electronic medium are necessary. For example, in the case of the online Marriage and Family course, we still need funding to create video case-study samples and/or to purchase the appropriate copyrights for the videotapes used in the traditional, face-to-face course.

There is no doubt that higher education must create a variety of course delivery mechanisms in order to stay competitive in the 21st century (Menninger, 2000). "Although the primary mission of the university -- the creation, preservation, integration, transmission, and application of knowledge -- are not changing, the particular realization of each of these roles is changing dramatically" (Duderstadt, 1997). We must also recognize, however, that in addition to variety, we need quality. This undoubtedly will require both university administrators and faculty to reassess many of their assumptions about the process of designing, developing, and delivering university instruction.

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Dr. Patricia Stevens (pstevens@ceo.cudenver.edu) is the Director of the Marriage and Family Training Program at the University of Colorado at Denver. She is the President of the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors, a Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor with the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, and a Certified Family Therapist. Dr. Stevens is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. She maintains a small private practice in Denver, CO. Dr. Stevens has written and presented extensively at the local, regional, national and international levels in the areas of marriage and family training, substance abuse, gender issues, and ethical and legal issues in marriage and family therapy. She is an approved online presenter with the State of Colorado Jurisprudence Workshop, which is required for licensure.

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